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ABSTRACT

A review of literature in the sales area reveals that the communication process between salespeople and their customers is a complex one offering a wide range of relationships. To develop a feeling of trust between the two parties, salespeople can use practical communication skills emphasizing their expertness, reliability, and dynamism. Sales managers, too, can help develop trust by training salespeople to be effective communicators. Trust is relevant to contingency approaches in sales and promotes customers' willingness to satisfy their needs with the help of salespeople. (FL)

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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING TRUST IN THE SALESPERSON/PROSPECT EXCHANGE

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COMMUNICATING TRUST IN THE SALESPERSON/PROSPECT EXCHANGE

Introduction and Specific Objectives

Communication theory as well as the literature concerning sales force development have long recognized the importance of developing trust between the individuals involved. Of course, it is recognized that the presence or absence of trust affects what is communicated or disclosed. However, the emphasis or interest in this topic appears to be less than it should be in today's fast changing and economically depressed environment. Recognizing that individuals in their attempt to deal with this will be more selective concerning what they purchase, an organization's sales force needs to be more competent at developing and demonstrating interpersonal trust. Research has shown a positive relationship between high trust and high performance in a variety of environments (Haney, 1979; Gibbs, 1961). More specifically a high interpersonal trust orientation has been shown to facilitate organizational communications (Sgro, et al., 1980; O'Reilley and Roberts, 1974). However, little research is available which endeavors to explain what activities could build an interpersonal trust orientation in a sales setting.

This paper reviews some of the literature of the sales area in order to present the current direction of personal selling research. The trust concept will then be briefly reviewed. Finally, guidelines will

be presented for improving the potential for longer lasting and more satisfying selling relationships through sales communication skills which build trust.

Theoretical Background

The objectives of the selling exchange is to influence the prospect to respond in a way favorable to the sales person and the firm. Research into this influence process has been vigorously pursued and agreement concerning the validity of the findings is not widespread. The most popular direction has been the findings that support the idea that the more alike the salesperson and prospect believe themselves to be, the more effective the selling process. Evans (1963) was an early proponent of the similarity idea and proposed that success depended not only on the individuals involved but also on how the individuals perceive and reach to each other. He found a significant relationship between performance (or sales success) and similarity across several demographic characteristics. In addition, he reported that the sold customer perceived the salesperson as a friend with a more "open" relationship. However, attempts to support these findings in other settings and with slightly different methodologies have been less than successful (Riordan, et al., 1977; Churchill, et al, 1975).

Brock (1965) and Woodside and Davenport (1974) studied the impact of not only customer/salesperson similarity but also expertise upon sales performance. Brock reported significantly greater results upon sales due to perceived similarity than from expertise. Woodside and Davenport, on the other hand, found expertise to lead to greater sales

than similarity. Research therefore is inconclusive concerning the validity of similarity and expertise. Current research is moving toward a contingency approach to sales success since, as in management, the salesperson must learn to adjust to the particular selling environment faced.

Weitz has been one of the most active researchers concerning contingency approaches in sales (1981, 1979, 1978). As in leadership trait research, he believes efforts to validate success in sales due to similarities between salespersons and prospects are unrealistic. A contingency approach recognizes the difficulty of matching the parties to a sales exchange according to some trait and recognizes the interactive nature of the communication process. Salespeople have long been recognized as the flexible arm of the promotion activities since they can tailor their sales approach to meet the unique characteristics and needs of the potential buyer. Weitz (1979, p. 108) recommends research along two-way interactions of behavior-situation types (among others) where the salesperson engages in specific behavior that fits the selling situation.

Salesperson alternative behaviors are either more or less effective depending upon the following conditions according to Weitz (1979, p. 113).

1. Anticipation of future interactions.
2. Nature of customer decision size, complexity, involvement.
3. Relative power of salesperson and customer.
4. Level of conflict--extent of negotiations, degree of competition, attitude of customer toward the salesperson.
5. Characteristics of the customer.

From the point of view of the salesperson, he or she should be expected to engage in those actions that will influence the consumer.

Trust as a Pervasive Part of the Contingency Framework

Given that understanding the selling situation requires a contingency approach, the development of trust would be important for influencing the prospect. Trust has been defined as an attitude displayed in a situation where the following characteristics may be evident: a person is relying on another person, a person is risking something valued, and a person is attempting to achieve a desired goal (Griffin, 1967). In addition, the term trust is often used to describe the personality characteristics that make a person trusting or trustworthy (Deutsch, 1960).

An attitude is a mental state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting influence upon the individual's response to various situations (Allport, 1935). As such, it is important to emphasize those aspects of that definition relevant to trust. First, an attitude is a state of readiness. Common observation confirms that individuals deal with many daily events and people in a trusting way without hesitation. Individuals are also in "readiness" to deal with events with varying degrees of trust or distrust in order to enhance the outcome or prevent damage to himself/herself. Second, the trusting attitude developes through experience and in fact becomes a directive factor in future behavior. This directive nature is another aspect of the definition worthy of emphasis. The trusting attitude is a predisposition to respond to a given object in a "trusting way." It is the quality of attitudes

that they require an object of orientation to which they are negative (distrustful) or positive (trustful) (Kinsella, 1967). Clearly, then, this attitude or predisposition of trust is an important part of effectiveness in interpersonal communication and is a vital ingredient in the salesperson/prospect communication exchange.

Past experiences in selling situations will surely predispose the individual to approach the exchange setting with varying degrees of trust or distrust. Barnes (1981, pp. 110-111) bases the feeling of distrust so common in communication on an assumption that the world is a dangerous place and that the individual must protect themselves. Mellinger (1956) defines this distrust as the feeling that another's intentions and motives are not what they say they are--that they are insincere or have ulterior motives. Further, a person who is distrusted is likely to be regarded as potentially threatening, especially where individuals are highly interdependent.

Gaggin (1975, pp. 306-07) has identified some of the elements that influence the degree of trust from the perception of the person who is to place trust in another. Interpersonal trust seems to be influenced by an individual's perception of these characteristics of the other individual:

1. Expertness; with respect to the topic being discussed. This may be demonstrated by the quantity of pertinent information, degree of ability or skill, or the soundness of judgment.

2. Reliability; the dependability, predictability, consistency, or perceived intentions of the person in whom trust is to be placed regarding the goals of the trusting person.

3. Dynamism; that behavior or actions perceived as more open and frank than closed or reserved and active rather than passive.

In a selling context, these elements of trust would seem critical to the salesperson since the prospect is goal directed and is continually evaluating the salesperson's trustworthiness. Other researchers have confirmed the importance of these components of trust. Brock (1965) and Woodside and Davenport (1974) studied the effects of expertise upon sales as was previously reviewed. Expertise was found to be particularly important by Woodside and Davenport. Busch and Wilson (1976) manipulated expertise and referent power in a study concerning the perception of business students of life insurance salespeople. Results indicated that the more expert the salesperson was perceived to be and the higher the perception of referent power or similarity the more trustworthy the salesperson was perceived to be. In addition, attitudes were more favorable about the product class.

Reliability or predictability is a necessary ingredient for trust and results from the proper use of power. Bonoma (1976, p. 502) defines trust as the placement of reliance by an individual in the true value of communication intended to influence that person in a risky situation where there is a possibility of incurring a loss. Trust then merges with the credibility of the influencer. Furthermore, Bonoma confirms that trust and relaibility are outcomes of past experiences. Bonoma states that we tend to trust and rely on those influencers who bring to the interaction a reputation for following their influencing actions with appropriate reinforcing deeds. Reliance and trust is also a result of favorable exchanges with reliable sources with whom we have had personal experience in past conflicts.

While dynamism is difficult to measure, insights may be gained from the literature. This active rather than passive, and open and frank rather than closed aspects of trust calls to mind that the salesperson must demonstrate through words and deeds, trustworthiness. Gabarro (1977) has reported several personal bases of influence resulting from extensive interviews about trust. The ability to get agreement on common goals was one form of action that helped develop trust with participants in the study. Perceptions held about the others' motives and the willingness to level with others when discussing problems were found to be important. Another aspect relevant to trust found by Gabarro was discreteness or the perception that the other person would not violate confidences. Mellinger (1956, p. 304) supports an active approach to reduce the anxiety that may exist in the exchange setting and states that the primary goal should be the reduction of anxiety levels between participants. Regardless of the characteristics of the salesperson and potential customer, establishing a basis of trust seems to be a necessary condition to success.

Communication Strategies to Aid In the Development of Trust

Influencing the prospect to respond in a way beneficial both to the salesperson and the prospect is the objective of sales communication theory. The Contingency approach to sales theory however fails to specifically address the importance of establishing trust as a necessary precondition for a selling opportunity. The two theories are highly interdependent since effectiveness is an outcome of the prospect placing trust in the salesperson and the recommendations made.

The evidence seems to indicate that to gain the maximum benefit of the selling opportunity a climate of trust should be developed and is the primary responsibility of the salesperson. Alexander (1977) states that communication training can help the individual take a contingency approach and provide the skills to influence the prospect in an ethical and meaningful way. The salesperson must be willing to be rejected or lose some prospects and may be expected to take more time under some conditions.

The following ideas are really the opposites of some common communication shortcomings. These are the failure to be open, the failure to listen, the failure to be specific, the failure to try to understand, and the failure to be honest about ourselves. The factors that <u>are</u> important to building trust have been grouped into three categories: 1) the perception by others that the individual has the background and experience that make their comments worthwhile, 2) the perception that the individual is willing to tell the truth, and 3) the perception by others that you are interested in them as human beings (Souerwine, 1978).

The following model helps to conceptualize the major thinking in this paper. (See Figure 1) The three communication strategies are now discussed in some detail.

The first group of strategies are intended to build the idea that the individual's expertise or knowledge is worthwhile. Salesmanship writers have frequently referred to this as the skill of outlining not only the obvious objectives that will be focused upon, but also the aspects of the unwritten of psychological contact. The salesperson can

do this by telling the prospect all of what can be expected to take place in the exchange. The stages that can be identified in the process and the admission that the purpose is to make a sale are important to communicate. Furthermore, as Souerwine (1978) points out, state why the individual should believe in the salesperson--what relevant experience or knowledge is possessed. Admitting that the salesperson may not be able to help the particular prospect faces up to the idea that there is a probability (however small) that the prospect may choose not to buy. In any case, the strategy of the salesperson should be one of openness, frankness and admission that this is a selling situation and that all barriers should be confronted and minimized to enhance the building of trust. Loomis (1959) has stated that the communication of genuine concern and cooperativeness is conducive to trust building. This certainly should be demonstrated early to show that the salesperson is willing to work at the level of the prospect.

The perception that the salesperson is willing to tell the truth is developed during the early stages of the process. Swinth (1967) has stated that an attempt to conceal or the creation of a feeling of concealment breaks trust. Therefore, self disclosure by the salesperson and complete discussion enhance the perception of truthfulness on the part of the salesperson. Another common method, however often misunderstood, is the use of third party referrals. A referral certainly helps reduce the fear that the individual desiring to be trusted may not be worthy of that trust. As Frost points out, referrals build the idea of predictability in the relationship and therefore increase the social control of both parties which is important to trust building

(Frost, et al., 1978). Communicating frequently that others have found the service of the firm and salesperson satisfactory adds to the feeling of truthfulness. Another facet to building the feeling of truthfulness is the willingness to discuss the disadvantages of your ideas or services. Stating these clearly and following them with reasons why your services offset these disadvantages builds the image of truthfulness and trustworthiness.

All the above ideas help to create the idea that the salesperson is truly interested in the individual and that the quality of the process is important. Frost calls this a degree of confidence in the altruism of the other defined as a devotion to the others' interests with ethical principles in mind.

In conclusion, the communication process of the salesperson and the prospect is a complex one offering a wide range of relationships. The objective should be to develop a feeling of trust with each other to maximize the satisfaction of all participants. The salesperson can use practical communication skills to build trust. By understanding how trust can be developed, the sales manager can train the salesperson to be a more effective communicator and have greater satisfaction with his clients and hence larger sales. Trust and the development of that attitude is relevant to contingency approaches in sales and creates the environment for influencing the prospect to satisfy a goal with the help of the salesperson.

DEVELOPING GREATER SALES SUCCESS THRU COMMUNICATING TRUST

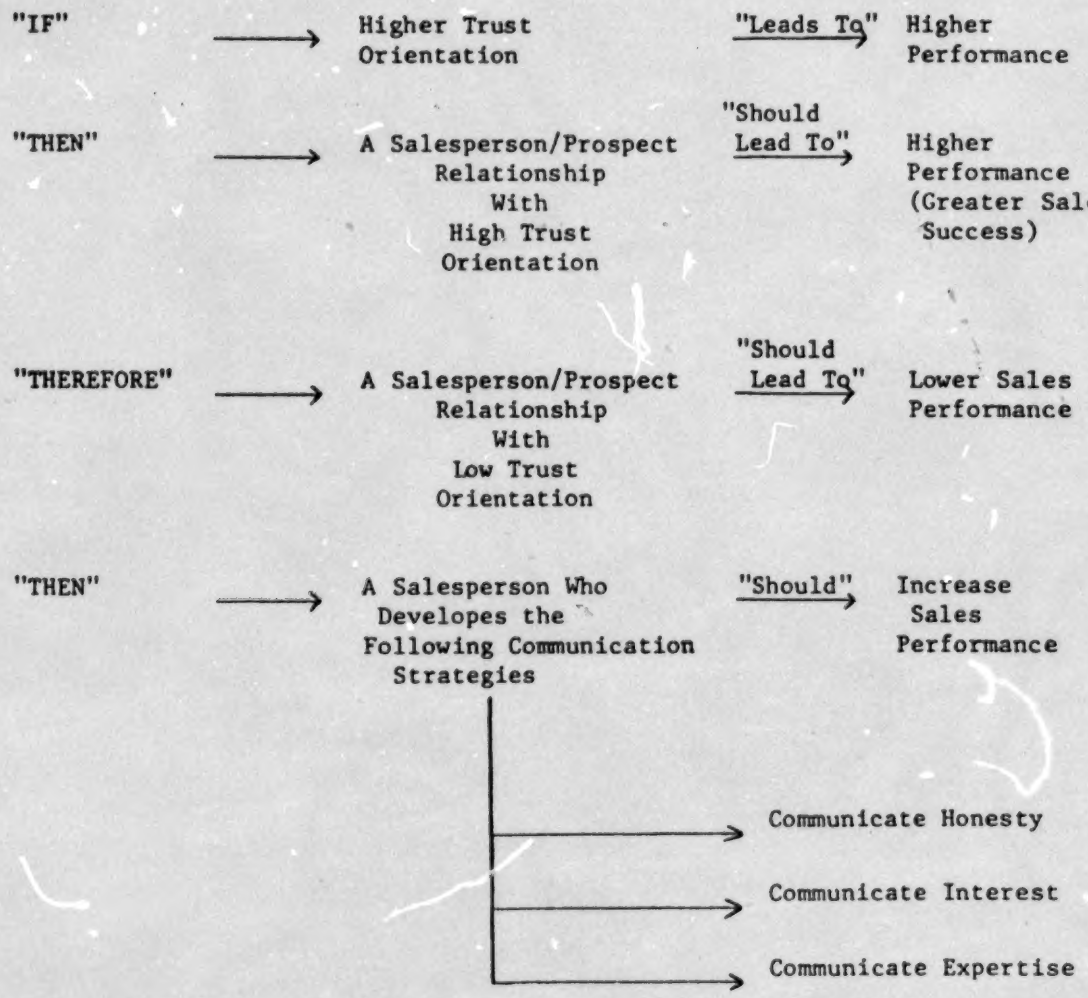

FIGURE 1

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